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Kurrild-Klitgaard, Peter

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Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard

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Three comments on "Gordon Tullock and the rational choice commitment"*

PETER KURRILD-KLITGAARD

Abstract: Three notes on Gordon Tullock (1922-2014), prepared for Liberty Fund's on-line conversation on his work and contributions.

Keywords: Gordon Tullock; public choice.

"Gordon Tullock: Rational Maverick" [Posted: Nov. 7, 2017]

It must be nearly impossible to read much by Gordon Tullock without coming away with—among many other things—the impression that he must have had one of the most creative and fruitful minds among modern social scientists. As Boettke rightly notes: "Tullock was a polymath." How many others could cover medieval Ottoman execution methods, mathematical analysis of voting, the history of Chinese diplomacy, the sex lives of insects, and modern social policies?

But Tullock was more than knowledgeable. Just peruse the chapters of *The Calculus of Consent* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962/2004) that he is known to have authored, or *The Social Dilemma* (Tullock 1974), or *Autocracy* (Tullock 1987), or almost any of his many journal articles, especially from the 1950s to the 1980s, and you will find one example after another of brilliant little, although not-quite-fully-developed, insights in one paragraph after another. Thoughts, suggestions, and conjectures that almost never were never fully elaborated, much less tested systematically, but could have been, are just lying there to be picked up.

For some years I kept my own list of things "to be explored" that I stumbled over in Tullock's writings. In fact, the very first

* The three comments were part of an on-line "conversation" in Liberty Fund's "Liberty Matters" series (<http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/lm-tullock>), November 2017.

international journal article I ever published grew out of just such a throw-away paragraph in *Autocracy* (Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000). My own interest in the potential disequilibrium of voting in multidimensional spaces came from Tullock's early, brief, and intuitive treatment (Tullock 1967) rather than the heavily technical proofs others had produced over the following decade.

Tullock was, as Buchanan called him, a "natural economist" (Buchanan 1987) in the sense that "the economic way of thinking" came so naturally to him that he could not help constantly taking it to new areas of application. He was always looking for another place to apply methodological individualism, the rational-actor principle, and the focus on exchange: yet another puzzle to be solved, another piece of knowledge to be passed on. In contrast, Tullock had very little interest in yet another minor technical contribution with little relevance to real-world issues.

So, I agree with Boettke's summary of Tullock's importance and that he had deserved a Nobel Prize:

"This was a prize that eluded him, and in my opinion he deserved his own prize for his various contributions to the study of human action beyond the realm of the market, that is, nonmarket decision-making – in law, politics, science, bureaucracies, nonprofits, and nature. Tullock was a trailblazer; he was always stalking taboo subjects and pushing out our intellectual boundaries."

But if Tullock was such a brilliant, inquisitive mind, why did he not receive the praise and rewards many of us think he should have received? There are probably more reasons than one—but in my opinion none of them should have denied him the honors that eluded him.

Was it that Tullock was not as "grand" a thinker as some other economists? Looking at the relatively narrow contributions of some other Nobel laureates, I think this would be a hard point to argue as a stand-alone reason. Tullock's contributions to our understanding of voting, rent-seeking, and log-rolling, and his broad application of the

rational-choice paradigm to human behavior, collective action, and our understanding of the law, easily outweigh the contributions of many Nobel laureates.

But I do think a problem was that Tullock so often—and almost always beginning in the mid-1970s or so—left his gold nuggets lying around, not quite polished. He threw 100 ideas up in the air and went on, where many others would have taken 10 of them and developed them further, endlessly applying and extending the insights and building “schools” around them and themselves.

Many others who have grappled with the question of why Tullock did not receive the honors he perhaps deserved have focused on his personality, namely, that he sometimes came across as impolite or even offensive.

Strangely, I never interpreted him that way—and I still remember the shock with which a world-famous Ivy League economist greeted my view that I found Tullock to be “nice”: “I have never heard anyone refer to Gordon as being ‘nice.’” Well, I think he was. Yes, he was odd, and yes, he could say things that some either would disagree with vehemently or would be taken aback by because of his often-provocative and direct tone and style. But in my many encounters with Tullock—from the first time I met him as a first-year undergraduate at a conference in 1986 to the last time I saw him, a year or so before his retirement—I always found him to be generous, hospitable, and helpful.

Yes, he could say things that some would find impolite or harsh. The first time I saw him after having sent him my doctoral dissertation, he said something like, “You could have spent your time and money more wisely. You used 400 pages to say what you could have said in four words: ‘Tullock is always right!’” I thought it was a funny remark—with a kernel of truth in it.

Yes, he could also seem socially handicapped. The combination of his ever-present intellectual focus, his very low voice, and his impaired hearing made dinner or lunch conversations a bit difficult sometimes, to say the least. But compared to at least a handful of

Nobel laureates in economics, Tullock did not come off as particularly odd.

Was it his politics? Again, it has been said by more than one economist—including people who actually like and practice public choice analysis—that Tullock had “reactionary” or “right-wing” views that made him out of step with the *Zeitgeist*.

It is true that he often would argue in favor of deeply unpopular points of view. (“There isn’t anything particularly good about democracy, aside from being democratic.”) He also seemed to enjoy some degree of being “politically incorrect.” But I am not so sure that Tullock was really as much an ideologue as many others believed. I remember the 1994 meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society in Cannes, when I was standing in the foyer talking with Tullock and Charles Rowley. A young French economics student, whom I knew to be a huge fan of Tullock, approached star-struck and said in a heavy accent, “Professor Tullock! I am such a great admirer! I have always wanted to ask you about libertarianism.” Tullock cut him off, saying, “I am not particularly interested in liberty,” and walked away, leaving the poor fellow with his jaw on the floor.

Was it rude? An impartial spectator would likely see it as such. I think Tullock—always the *homo economicus*—was merely trying to save time for both of them. If anything, Tullock was probably a relatively pragmatic consequentialist of some sort—not necessarily a hard-core utilitarian, but broadly interested in what arrangements would tend to produce the best outcomes. Sometimes it would lead his policy conclusions in one direction—other times in another. He was not much of an ideologue, and ultimately everything was up for discussion.

And what about the other explanations that have been thrown around? -- for example, that Tullock was not an economist by formal training. Well, neither was Herbert Simon and Elinor Ostrom. Or that he was not very technical in an age when mathematical prowess was and is so much in vogue. Again, the same can be said about Ostrom, James Buchanan, F. A. Hayek, and Douglass North.

I think that the "real" reason was the sum total of it all. Tullock might have received his Nobel Prize despite being personally odd or being placed on the political right or not being trained as an economist or not publishing highly mathematical models. But all of this together, combined with the fact that he often went on to new ideas and applications rather than building empires around himself, probably made it highly unlikely.

Fortunately for the rest of us, there are still so many insightful nuggets from Tullock lying around, ready to be picked up--perhaps more than many think. I find Boettke's points regarding Tullock's approach being more "praxeological" and less neoclassical than often portrayed particularly important. Anti-rational-choice academics often portray Tullock as the archetypical "economic imperialist"—a view he often attributed to himself. (Tullock 2006 [1976]) But in reality, his approach was much more nuanced and multifaceted than many have appreciated.

"Tullock: Praxeologist or Economic Imperialist?" [Posted: November 30, 2017]

Prof. Boettke initially brought up the issue that Gordon Tullock really should be seen as closer to the Austrian school than is commonly acknowledged—a point already pursued here by Prof. Levy regarding how Tullock had been influenced by Mises's *Human Action*. (Mises 1949/1966)

Now we seem to be facing two interpretations that easily could seem at odds. On the one hand, there are the indications suggested by Boettke and Levy that Tullock had more of an "open-ended" (broad) rationality assumption, closer to the human-action perspective of the Austrian school than is usually acknowledged. On the other hand, Tullock has usually been seen as almost the intellectual embodiment of *homo economicus*—the economic imperialist par excellence. He embraced the label of "economic imperialism" himself (e.g., Tullock 1972/2004), and a collection of

some of his (rejected) papers was entitled *On the Trail of Homo Economicus*. (Tullock 1994) This was also how close friends and collaborators saw him, e.g., Buchanan in his description of Tullock as a "natural economist" (Buchanan 1987)—a perspective Buchanan distanced himself from.

So which picture of Tullock is right? Boettke (and Levy) suggest the former, Buchanan the latter. How about Tullock himself? Let me say that I think that both sides are right but that Tullock possibly created confusion about his own "approach."

What we perhaps should keep in mind is the distinction Buchanan made to highlight the differences between himself and scholars like Tullock (Buchanan 1979: 41-51, 57ff): between the ("high") abstract levels of the "pure logic of choice" and the (low) concrete levels of specific models with narrower assumptions, e.g., those associated with what Buchanan called "the abstract theory of economic behavior." This is to a large extent the distinction between Misesian praxeology and day-to-day economic analysis, as in, e.g., applications of the theory of the firm. Or as Buchanan suggested: it is the distinction between a game-theoretical model with only preference orderings given and one where objective payoffs are used. With the former, the structure of the preferences alone may tell us something important but quite general about human action—but it cannot tell us very much about any specific situation. In contrast, as soon as we limit what may enter the utility function and the size of specific payoffs, we can be more precise in our predictions—but with the cost being at a lesser level of generality. (Some may here see a similarity to "Austrian" discussions of the use of ideal types, e.g., Kurrild-Klitgaard 2001.)

Seen in this perspective, one could say, as Buchanan suggested, that his analyses mostly operated at the "higher" levels, while Tullock mostly did so at the "lower" levels. But the two levels are not necessarily opposed—they are simply different and may be relevant for different kinds of analysis. In *The Calculus of Consent*, where Tullock himself used the term "praxiological" (sic), he too, like Buchanan, was interested in a more abstract type of analysis than

when he was analyzing, say, U.S. social policies (Tullock 1986), military tactics (Brennan and Tullock 1982), or survival strategies of medieval monarchs (Tullock 2001). Tullock, simply put, operated along all the steps of the ladder of abstraction—but usually without spending much time on philosophy of science and methodology, preferring instead the narrower, more empirical applications.

And permit me here to return to the issue of Tullock's personality: teasing, politically incorrect, and actively seeking out intellectual opposition, features that no doubt led him to make oral (re-)statements of his thought more "outrageous" than they really were. Many people have, for example, heard Tullock quip that his favourite piece of literature was Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*—except, Tullock said, "for the unhappy ending when Scrooge goes soft." This, of course, was a joke, but what did Tullock mean when he widely claimed, as Boettke mentions, that people are 95 percent narrowly self-interested? Of course, he did not mean that it always and everywhere was exactly 95 percent, as if it was a natural law. He meant it at the "low" level as an empirical generalization, and a falsifiable one, most importantly--and one admitting, implicitly, that people are not exclusively narrowly self-interested.

Does it matter? It does to some extent. The Virginia school is usually distanced—sometimes by its adherents, most often by its opponents—from two of its "cousins": The Bloomington school of the Ostrows and the Rochester school of Riker. (Mitchell 1988) The Bloomington institutionalists are often seen as more interested in the softer institutions and informal norms. (Aligica and Boettke 2009) And the game theorists of the Rochester school have for decades allowed utility functions of actors to consist of virtually anything and sometimes as quite abstract and open-ended. (Riker and Ordeshook 1973) These are genuine differences when compared to Tullock's rhetoric and predominant practice. But when Buchanan's distinction is kept in mind, they are not polar opposites as much as different points along a continuum.

"Tullock on Liberty" [Posted: November 30, 2017]

I want to bring up a point that few have touched directly upon in this conversation, namely, Tullock's ideological position. After all, this is "Liberty Matters" run by Liberty Fund. So what were Tullock's views on liberty?

As I mentioned in my first comment, Tullock seems—from anecdotal experience—not to have seen himself as a libertarian. In fact, when you browse Tullock's works, there is a marked lack of references to liberty. The word appears six times in *The Calculus of Consent*—all six in the titles of cited works. However, the cited works are not important in this respect: they were Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958/1969) and Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)—which in itself says a great deal. Similarly with "freedom," to which there are a total of 15 references, but again mostly titles, including Leoni's *Freedom and the Law* (1961/1991). In other prominent works by Tullock (e.g., 1974, 1986, and 1987), there is even less emphasis on liberty/freedom.

That, of course, did not mean that Tullock was uninterested in how free humans are, but rather that he, first and foremost, was a consequentialist of some form. Certainly, when you read him straight from his earliest works, there seems often—as with many economists—to be much of a utilitarian reasoning at play and a decidedly non-"moral" attitude.

But Tullock rarely made normative recommendations based in crude comparisons of supposed utilities across individuals. Sometimes, but not often. Most of the time Tullock seems to have approached what perhaps more resembles a form of "rule utilitarianism." He was interested in what arrangements in general would tend to have the highest net value, broadly understood, to society.

This is probably where Tullock shared a path with Buchanan and at the same time diverged. They shared a view of market exchange as being socially beneficial and a fear of what would happen if law and order broke down. (Buchanan 1977/2001, Tullock 1972/2004) But

where Buchanan was interested in the potential for cooperation, Tullock was fascinated by the lack of it.

So, if we compare their respective writings, we see—somewhat simplified—a tale of two theories of what happens when human beings have divergent interests: the one somewhat idealistic and rationalist (Buchanan), showing how the same forces that work in the marketplace (contract and exchange) may lead them to adopt institutional frameworks that will work for the common good (Buchanan 1975/1999), the other empiricist, skeptical, and cynical (Tullock), seeing potential conflict (war, plunder, rent-seeking, etc.) everywhere (Tullock 1974)--the former seeing men as naturally equal, the latter seeing them as naturally ending up in different places of power and hierarchy.

This is, so to speak, a modern conflict between a Tom Paine, or at least a Thomas Jefferson, and an Edmund Burke (although Tullock, of course, would have had none of Burke's romanticism).

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